

# Sign consumption and sign promotion in visitor attractions: A netnography of the visitor experience in Titanic Belfast

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## Sign consumption and sign promotion in visitor attractions: A netnography of the visitor experience in Titanic Belfast

### Abstract

**Purpose** – Drawing upon Baudrillard's concept of sign-value, this exploratory study investigates consumer behavior and sign perception in visitor attractions.

**Design/methodology/approach** – By adopting netnography 133 customer to customer reviews sourced from TripAdvisor were analyzed regarding visitors' online post-visit impressions.

**Findings** – The findings reveal that netnography contributes to a deeper understanding of sign consumption and sign promotion and examines how visitors attribute symbolic meanings to their experience in Titanic Belfast.

**Practical implications** – The findings show that the co-creation and re-evaluation of the visitor experience through consumers' online reviews should be taken into account by both managers and marketers. Furthermore, advertising should avoid creating excessive expectations to visitors in order to decrease the possibility of negative disconfirmation, which can be easily and instantly spread online. Another implication concerns the winning awards of visitor attractions, hotels and restaurants of a destination which may be used as a basis of co-branding marketing campaigns to enhance destination brand image.

**Social implications** – This study opens up the debate on the commodification of the visitor experience and the commercialization of visitor attractions.

**Originality/value** – This article not only advances our apprehension of sign-value regarding the visitor experience but also that of sign consumption and sign promotion in the visitor attraction sector.

**Keywords:** Sign consumption, Sign promotion, Visitor attractions, Visitor experience, Netnography, Titanic Belfast

Article type: Research paper

### 1. Introduction

Despite increasing research interest in visitor attractions (Kolar, 2017; Leask, 2016; de Rojas and Camarero, 2008; Weidenfeld, 2010; Weidenfeld *et al.*, 2016) visitors' consumer behavior remains overlooked, particularly from a sociological perspective. Drawing upon Baudrillard's (1981) concept of sign-value, this study attempts to shed light on consumer behavior and sign perception in visitor attractions, which concerns the understanding and perception of signs before and during the visitor experience. Semiotics and especially the semiotic theory of the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce has been used in visitor attraction studies but focused primarily on perceived authenticity (for instance Grayson and Martinec 2004; Ram *et al.*, 2016; Weidenfeld *et al.*, 2016). Additionally, symbolic meanings attributed

to attractions have been studied in the context of heritage attractions as signifiers of national identity (Park, 2010; Zhang *et al.*, 2015).

Sign-value is the outcome of the commercialization and consumerism effects of modern capitalism, influenced by advertising, fashion and the media. Based on the logic of differentiation, sign-value attributed to commodities and services consumers purchase, reveals elements of their status and identity in modern society. In this regard the visitor experience, which is infused with symbolic meanings as sign-value, reflects how leisure services and souvenirs in the tourism sector are perceived as signs of modern culture (Paraskevaidis and Andriotis, 2015; Watson and Kopachevsky, 1994). In order to explore sign-value, sign consumption and sign promotion in visitor attractions, Titanic Belfast (TB) was selected, because it comprises a recently constructed attraction that gained immediate global media attention (Coyles, 2013).

The reputation of the RMS (Royal Mail Ship) Titanic as a majestic mechanical construction at the time, the widespread fame of being unsinkable and the tragic ending with the loss of hundreds of lives transformed this ship into a legend (Brown *et al.*, 2013). Global interest in the Titanic legacy was revitalized in popular culture in 1997 when director James Cameron launched the 'Titanic' movie which became a blockbuster (Brown *et al.*, 2013). Thus, although a newly constructed visitor attraction, TB acts since its opening as a signifier of a worldwide famous story. It connotes an authentic connection to the Titanic saga, as visitors stroll along the original shipyard where RMS Titanic was constructed (Johnson, 2014). TB also offers the opportunity to experience a simulacrum of the tragic voyage. The simulacrum is an imitation of a real thing or a person like statues of important people or key figures. In the case of TB the exterior and the interior of the museum with its exhibits, act as simulations of the Titanic experience, which is offered as a leisure service (Ong and Jin, 2017).

Another perspective concerns Titanic Belfast's award named as the World's leading tourist attraction for 2016 at the World Travel Awards (2017). Winning awards are rarely discussed in tourism and hospitality studies having the potential to enhance destination image. Furthermore award-winning visitor attractions, restaurants and hotels may promote their awarded brands under a common destination marketing campaign, whereby destination brands are used as signs of distinction. This is in line with the concept of co-branding, which refers to an alliance of two or more brands that formulate a new composite brand (Ashton and Scott, 2011). For example a co-branding marketing campaign (Ashton and Scott, 2011) can be implied by the Michelin-starred restaurants of San Sebastian in Spain, promoting their restaurants and Basque gastronomy as signs of the San Sebastian destination (Franklin, 2016).

This study examines visitors' post-visit impressions in TB, where leisure services and souvenirs are promoted as signs through advertising and sign promotion. In this regard Baudrillard's (1981) concept of sign-value within qualitative research methodology is a useful means of understanding deeper layers of sign consumption and consumer behavior of visitors. Furthermore, netnography was applied as a useful research method in order to understand visitor experience and consumption habits through online customer to customer reviews. In addition, aspects of TB's management and marketing policies are also discussed in the context of contemporary consumer capitalism. The study also explores whether and how visitors attribute symbolic meanings to their visitor experience and whether their expectations are confirmed or disconfirmed through sign consumption. It also examines whether visitors' expectations are influenced by sign promotion and the TB's winning award.

## 2. Conceptual aspects of sign-value and sign consumption

Commodities are often perceived as signs, which feature social status, prestige, social inclusion as well as social identity to those who possess and consume desirable commodities like luxury sports cars, fashion clothes etc. (Baudrillard, 1981; Dant, 1996). The meaning-making process of commodities as signs is enabled in modern capitalism by advertising, commercialization and fashion attributing sign-value to commodities. Therefore, sign-value offers the potential of distinction and differentiation of the individual's social identity (Baudrillard, 1981). Whereas commodities as well as services are promoted in modern capitalism through advertising in mass media as signs, not every commodity or service is attributed with sign-value (Paraskevaidis and Andriotis, 2015). The function of sign-value is twofold: first, it reveals the assignment of symbolic meanings related to modern culture and fashion and second, it relates commodities and services to items of prestige and social status (Baudrillard, 1981; Dant, 1996; Gotham, 2002). Whereas Baudrillard (1981) linked sign-value to prestige, capitalism predominantly produces ordinary commodities and services some of which are projected through advertising as signs, but lack the potential of distinction, because they do not add prestige to their owners (Paraskevaidis and Andriotis, 2015).

Commodities like Coca-cola, Big Mac, etc., function as globally known signs of modern American pop culture, which add no prestige but are carriers of cultural interest and means of social inclusion (Boley *et al.*, 2018). Other ordinary commodities are neither projected as signs nor add social status, like the majority of commercial products for daily use e.g. private label detergents. Therefore, sign-value depends on social representations as some commodities and services add prestige to their consumers while others do not. Notably, social representations are substantially influenced and shaped by the mass media (Fredline and Faulkner, 2000) and in the modern era of digital communication, sign-value is empowered through social media and the internet (Bolin, 2011). When customers consume commodities and services attributed with sign-value (i.e. commodities and services loaded with symbolic meanings and/or prestige), it can be referred to as sign consumption. In case Baudrillard's sign-value is partially evident in consumption patterns (being disengaged from prestige and social status attainment), sign consumption reveals only the attribution of symbolic meanings to the consumer experience; it still continues to be useful in understanding consumer behavior in modern capitalist culture as it sheds light on how commodities and services are transformed into signs (Dimanche and Samdahl, 1994). Thus, sign-value is primarily perceived in the context of this study as the value consumers attribute to commodities and services that link their individuality to lifestyle modes recognized and adopted by other social groups. Hence, consuming signs of modern culture acts as a process of social inclusion but at the same time social identity is recognized in modern western societies mainly through the commodification of the way of life (McDonald *et al.*, 2017).

## 3. Sign-value, sign consumption and sign promotion in visitor attractions

Even though commodification has been highlighted in tourism studies (for instance Roland, 2010; Shepherd, 2002), sign-value in tourism including visitor attractions is rarely discussed. Lifestyle trends often determine whether cities and

their urban landscapes become “in or passé” something that depends on their commercial and marketing exposure in the media and lifestyle magazines (Ashworth and Page, 2011, p.9). In order to preserve visitors’ interest, cities use advertising and media to present an attractive image of unique attractions (Abrahamson, 2014). A common practice for improving the attractiveness of an urban destination is the use of iconic architecture (e.g. the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain) and/or signature buildings (e.g. the Oslo Opera House in Norway) which enhance destination image (Smith and Strand, 2011). In such cases urban planning and city branding are based on the logic of differentiation, as urban planners are trying to rejuvenate urban spaces through unique building projects. The preservation of a unique cultural identity in modern urban landscapes often leads to the creation of signs, a fact already noted by MacCannell (1999) who perceived tourist attractions as signs. Similarly, through city branding architectural buildings and urban spaces become commodities (Abrahamson, 2014) and as Gotham (2002, p.1751) notes: “cities and their festivals have become commodities that tourism agencies advertise, market and sell like any other commodity.” Visitor attractions therefore serve as the original which is the sign, whose images are often reproduced by the media, reshaped by advertising and reprinted on souvenirs and other commercial products.

Promotional advertising of visitor attractions’ image, creates new symbolic meanings in consumers’ consciousness and affects consumer behavior (Byun and Jang, 2015; Gotham, 2002). The reproduced images serve as simulacra because advertised images are connected to the original as they refer to a certain location where the real architectural building is located. They serve as simulacra but not in the strict sense of Baudrillard’s homonym concept. Baudrillard (1994) elaborated the concept of simulacra by meaning imitations of the real that are dissociated with reality. In his own words simulacra are: “models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (Baudrillard, 1994, p.1). The reproduced images of a visitor attraction are copies of the original (the real) which reshape meanings attributed to the real attraction. For example, before the opening of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao in 1997 there were several concerns that this architectural building was incompatible with the local culture as it was considered a symbol of Frank Gehry’s modern iconic architectural style (Plaza and Haarich, 2015). However, since its opening, the Guggenheim Bilbao has been transformed into a worldwide known landmark of Bilbao (Plaza and Haarich, 2015). Thus, the simulacra of Guggenheim Bilbao as promoted in the mass and social media endowed the museum with new meanings and turned it into a sign of the newly regenerated image of Bilbao city (Sainz, 2012). The concept of simulacra is also useful in understanding visitors’ experiences in heritage sites, as in the case of Chinese visitors who consume a simulacrum of North Song dynasty history at a heritage-based theme park in Kaifeng, China (Ong and Jin, 2017).

The mass media play a crucial role in sign promotion of visitor attractions and influence visitation preferences of tourists. In this regard sign-value and the logic of differentiation are also prominent in visitor attractions’ marketing and sign promotion. Sign promotion is the promotion of any commodity or service loaded with symbolic images, meanings, virtues and/or ideas through branding, advertising and/or marketing as a distinct sign in comparison with competitive commodities or services. Sign promotion in visitor attractions focuses on the distinct elements of the attraction regarding its historical, spatial and/or architectural characteristics in order to transform the attraction into a distinctive sign. While managers and marketers try to promote attractions as being different and distinct signs in relation to other competitive attractions, they seek for awards. Awards also play a pivotal role in



reshaping the image of visitor attractions and are used as helpful marketing tools. Despite the fact that World Travel Awards (2017) have been an established institution for over two decades they are rarely mentioned in tourism and hospitality studies. It is quite obvious that awards are used by destinations and visitor attractions as an advertising tool, such as the Titanic Belfast (2017), which promotes its winning award on its official website. In the same vein Michelin stars might be used by restaurants in promoting their unique gastronomic experiences based on their distinctive award. Uniqueness comprises another distinct element, which could be the basis for sign promotion campaigns as in the case of Ice hotels, which also serve as attractions (Keinan and Kivetz, 2011).

### 3.1. Sign consumption, sign promotion and the visitor experience

Besides the visitor attraction's marketing policy, sign consumption and sign promotion are strongly related to the visitor experience. Based on Vygotsky (1978), Kim and Fesenmaier (2017, p.29) claim that "people use mediating signs to understand and represent the experiential world." While studying the visitor experience at the pre-visit stage, visitors shape expectations based on advertising, word of mouth information or prior visitation experience (de Rojas and Camarero, 2008). The latter concerns the case of repeat visitors, but when prior experience is absent, expectations are primarily based on desirable images created by visitor attractions' marketing policy as well as the mass and the social media (Narangajavana *et al.*, 2017). When expectations are fulfilled the overall experience results in visitor satisfaction. In case the visitor experience exceeds the expectations, it is considered as positive disconfirmation, which increases visitor satisfaction (de Rojas and Camarero, 2008). Finally, when expectations are not met it leads to negative disconfirmation and visitor dissatisfaction. The aforementioned theoretical model is called the 'expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm' and has been widely used in tourism and hospitality studies (Zehrer *et al.*, 2011).

Hence, the creation of high expectations has a greater chance to lead to thwarted expectations and visitor dissatisfaction, a fact that should be taken into account while designing sign promotion strategies. The role of sign promotion is in creating and influencing expectations, which are in turn, confirmed or disconfirmed by sign consumption. Another important factor of the visitor experience, are the post-visit impressions and how these affect visitor's emotional state. Kim and Fesenmaier (2017, p.34) assert that sharing post-trip experiences on the social media: "generally results in a more positive evaluation" of the trip. Likewise Knobloch *et al.*, (2017) note that negative emotions like nervousness and anxiety before undertaking some tourism activities like skydiving are eventually evaluated as positive experiences. In conclusion, post-visit impressions and evaluations of the visitor experience shared on the internet lead to new interpretations of the overall experience. Additionally, visitors' and tourists' postings about their travel experiences co-create new meanings and evaluations of visitor attractions and destinations in combination with official marketing campaigns, something that significantly influences potential visitors' and tourists' expectations (Narangajavana *et al.*, 2017).

## 4. Methodology

This exploratory study addresses past research negligence of sign consumption and sign promotion in visitor attractions. In order to choose an adequate research method that offers a deeper understanding of the aforementioned themes based on visitors' perceptions and experiences and in line with Leask's (2016) call for employing new research methods in the study of visitor attractions, netnography was selected. Moreover as stated by Echtner (1999), symbolic meanings of the vacation experience can be studied with the use of ethnographic methods, and netnography comprises an evolution of the ethnographic research methodology. Further support for the research methodology adopted in this study, followed by data collection and analysis are provided below.

#### 4.1. Case study – study area

Titanic Belfast is a modern designed architectural 'must see' iconic attraction in Northern Ireland: "focused on the history of the 'Titanic' and which opened on the centenary of its sinking in April, 2012" (Coyles, 2013, p.332). It is situated adjacent to the original dockyard where the famous ship was constructed. Based on its salience in the official city of Belfast's website and touristic brochures it is perceived as an iconic architectural sign, which drives the rejuvenation of the Titanic Quarter area in Belfast as a tourism destination. It may be going through tourism iconization process, defined as activities and processes, which imbue visitor attraction services with desirable images of persons, cities, regions and cultures and thereby making them saleable and endowing them with iconicity (Weidenfeld *et al.*, 2016). By becoming a representative sign of the Titanic legacy, this visitor attraction gained global media attention and was initially promoted as an iconic brand (Brown *et al.*, 2013; Coyles, 2013).

Given that TB is a visitor attraction, which is historically related to its location and is used to promote the Titanic heritage aspect, there is an ongoing debate about its commodification through tourism (Hill, 2014; Holehouse, 2012). Coyles (2013, p.354) underlines that: "'Titanic Belfast' shamelessly hopes finally to capitalize on the ever-elusive 'Titanic' cash-cow that has managed to escape Belfast." Therefore, the commodification of Titanic memory being relaunched in the modern iconic building comprises a suitable visitor attraction for the applied research of the sign-value, sign consumption and sign promotion under study.

#### 4.2. Data collection

The digital age and the wide use of the internet are reflected in qualitative research by the appearance of netnography which is a relatively new qualitative research method that is adequate in understanding human online interactions (Kozinets, 2002; 2015). Although netnography was initially employed in marketing and consumer studies, nowadays it is commonly used in social sciences (Kozinets, 2015). Likewise netnography has appeared in tourism and hospitality research (for instance Goulding *et al.*, 2013; Kolar, 2017; Mkono, 2012; Mkono *et al.*, 2013; Mkono and Tribe, 2017; Wu and Pearce, 2017) by offering an insider's perspective on "post-visit discussions and shared experiences" on the internet (Goulding *et al.*, 2013, p.311). It was considered suitable because it offers the opportunity to gather rich data

from a great variety of respondents after their post-visit impressions and lived experiences. In this study, non-participatory (or passive) netnographic approach was chosen in order to collect archival online data by avoiding online interactions with informants as this might affect negatively the survey (Costello *et al.*, 2017). Informants might change their attitude and are more careful in expressing their opinions when they are aware that their online interactions are subject to a survey (Fisher and Smith, 2011).

In this regard this exploratory study gathered data from post-visit impressions of visitors regarding their experience at TB, which were freely and naturally expressed on the internet. The archival data was sourced from TripAdvisor, which is considered as the most popular online travel community and a helpful virtual domain for netnographic tourism research (Lee *et al.*, 2011; Mkono and Tribe, 2017). In total 1,676 customer reviews posted on TripAdvisor during the period from January to June 2017 were identified and read carefully. Reviews were selected if they included important content, which was relevant to the emerging themes identified in the literature review, such as sign-value, sign consumption and sign promotion. Visitors' reviews providing descriptive information about the ticket prices, the quality of food and beverage, and simplistic narratives on fun and entertainment were excluded.

This process resulted in 133 copied representative and meaningful postings from TripAdvisor regarding their rich content and strong relevance to the literature review, which were archived in word documents and were numbered starting from the first collected in January 2017. This careful selection of customer reviews is similar to purposive sampling method (Kozinets, 2002). Moreover limiting the selection of postings to the most meaningful ones, which offer new insights is considered as data saturation and marks the ending of the data collection procedure (Kozinets, 2002). In order to ensure the credibility of the data used in this study reviews were copied directly from TripAdvisor without alterations and corrections on syntax errors (Mkono, 2012; Mkono and Tribe, 2017). Since these reviews are posted on a publicly available internet site, the research activity of the authors was not revealed (Mkono and Tribe, 2017). Regarding the ethical guidelines of netnography, permission is required when directly quoted excerpts from online reviews are used (Kozinets, 2002; 2015; Wu and Pearce, 2017). Thus, permission was obtained from TripAdvisor.

#### 4.3. Data analysis

A common data analysis procedure in netnography is content analysis which is strongly related with textual data surveys (Costello *et al.*, 2017; Kozinets, 2015). According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005, p.1278) content analysis in qualitative research concerns: "the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns." Following this procedure the data gathered from the archived postings have been read and re-read several times in order to apply manual coding. The manual coding process is considered more adequate when the amount of data is small as it offers a more intrusive analysis in relation to qualitative software programs which usually rely on keywords (Kozinets, 2015). The coding process began with the apprehension of the content of the data, followed by applying codes to interesting and repeating notions. Subsequently the coded data was categorized into themes and sub-themes. The sub-themes were grouped into the main themes identified in the literature review, namely the sign-value concept, sign consumption and sign promotion. In this regard the sub-



themes of sign consumption that emerged during the coding process include the simulacrum of the Titanic experience, architecture as a signifier, iconization, commodification of space & dissatisfaction, and souvenirs. In the same vein two sub-themes of sign promotion emerged namely, advertising and expectations, the World Travel Awards and TB's marketing policy. The aforementioned sub-themes are presented in Table 1 and provide a more detailed analysis of the main themes under study.

One of the main disadvantages of qualitative research is the subjective interpretation of the data (Stepchenkova *et al.*, 2009). Thus in order to avoid misinterpretation of the primary data, the second author also read and re-read many times the data and implemented manual coding. As a result the data findings of the first author were confirmed by the second author and only some minor divergence was found in one sub-theme of the phenomenon under study, which was not developed in the study findings as it was considered of minor importance by both authors. This process is considered as 'investigator triangulation' when "different researchers interpret the same body of data" and increases the trustworthiness of the study (Decrop, 1999, p.159).

It is also noteworthy that a major weakness of netnography is relying on fake customer reviews as for example customers writing a review for a destination they have never visited (Mkono *et al.*, 2013). Thus there is always some degree of ambiguity regarding the authenticity of online reviews. In order to verify the credibility of online customer reviews under study, the proposed identification method by Munzel (2016, p.104) states that three basic steps are helpful in reducing online deceptive reviews: "[a.] the amount of disclosed information about the reviewer, [b.] the consensus between the review and the average ratings on a review site, and [c.] the activation of a deception-aware mindset." Criterion a. could not be applied to the reviews under study, as TripAdvisor is an anonymous reviewer site (Wong and Qi, 2017). As far it concerns criterion b. the authors realized that the positive reviews were of high consensus as the majority of the reviews had a positive content and high average ratings in TripAdvisor. The few negative reviews used in this study were selected because of their rich and fruitful content offering a wider knowledge of the phenomenon under study while being compared with the positive reviews. Consequently criterion c. as quoted by Munzel (2016, p.99) concerns the case when: "consumers acquire their persuasion (and deception) knowledge from various interactions and sources such as their intimate peers, [and] observation of marketing activities." In this regard the authors studied several customer reviews on the Facebook page of TB and compared their content to the selected reviews from TripAdvisor. This process was useful as customer reviews on TB's Facebook page were of similar content, recognizing this way the credibility of the aforementioned information cues. The authors did not remove any reviews of TripAdvisor while being considered as deceptive but avoided to include those ones, which were simplistic and of poor content.

Furthermore, the anonymous and/or pseudonymous reviews might be perceived as another weakness of netnography (Lee *et al.*, 2011). However, other scholars assert that this phenomenon indicates reliability of data, given that customers' candid opinions are freely and honestly expressed (Kozinets, 2015; Mkono, 2012; Mkono *et al.*, 2013). In this regard, even though TripAdvisor as an anonymous review site has developed a fraud detection system based on an algorithm (Baka, 2016), fake reviews still continue to comprise the major weakness of

netnography, as the identification methods and detection software only reduce rather than eradicate deceptive online reviews.

## 5. Study Findings

### 5.1. Sign-value

The findings regarding sign-value were evident in a small number of reviews (10 out of 133). The relationship between sign-value and the RMS Titanic lies in the fact that the famous ship: “was also the last word in luxury, a floating grand hotel” (Brown *et al.*, 2013, p.598). Baudrillard’s concept of sign-value is compatible with the luxurious construction and the amenities offered to the passengers at its maiden voyage (Johnson, 2014). One of the objectives of this study is to realize whether visitors at the TB museum perceive their experience as adding prestige to their social identity or status. In recognizing visitors’ representations of the luxury settings of the ship as displayed in TB museum the following visitors commented on TripAdvisor:

Review # 58: “An all round experience, it has several floors exploring Belfast’s industrial history, how the Titanic was built, the immense scale of fitting her out and the sheer luxury of the finished article...”

Review # 77: “Absolutely my favourite part was right at the end when we walked across to see the SS Nomadic. Built as a tender to serve the big ships (specifically the Titanic) in the shallow harbour at Cherbourg, she has had an amazing life, and has now been lovingly restored to give you a taste of the luxury experienced by the Titanic’s passengers”.

Whereas a few visitors seemed to realize luxurious elements in TB’s exhibits, nobody mentioned that the experience in TB’s environment added prestige to their identity, contrary to other unique tourist experiences in luxurious settings at different tourism and hospitality businesses, such as luxury hotels and restaurants, which display social status and wealth (Yang and Mattila, 2014; Boley *et al.*, 2018). Perhaps visitors gaining knowledge in TB did not consider this acquisition as being distinctive regarding their social identity. However, sign-value is twofold; it refers to social status attainment and the symbolic meanings attributed through sign consumption. Given that: “in the modern culture of consumption generally, touristic consumption is ‘sign-driven’” (Watson and Kopachevsky, 1994, p.645), the TB museum becomes a space where the connotation of signs considers the overall visitors’ experience by consuming the services offered as well as the souvenirs sold. Overall, symbolic meanings attributed to the visitor experience are profound in the themes of sign consumption and sign promotion, which will be explored in the next sections.

### 5.2. Sign consumption

#### 5.2.1. Simulacrum of the Titanic experience

Nineteen reviews (14.29%) covered the simulacrum of the visitor experience in TB. Undoubtedly the TB museum comprises a modern designed space promoting

multiple signs of the Titanic legacy such as photographs, artifacts and replicas (e.g. reconstructions of the first, second and third-class cabins of the famous ship). Visitors are not only historically informed about the original place where the famous steamship was constructed (the dockyard next to the TB museum) but are also given the opportunity to experience a simulacrum of the RMS Titanic passengers' tragic voyage. The following visitors' reviews on TripAdvisor are indicative:

Review # 7: "The exhibits create an experience in which you feel as if you have seen the ship built and walked through the ship."

Review # 15: "Very educational museum. Very modern and a real experience. What makes it extra special is it's location, right next to where the Titanic was build!"

Review # 32: "What a great Museum for Belfast which will be great for tourism. So informative and also interactive. I could imagine being on the Titanic. Fabulous."

The simulacrum of the Titanic experience is confirmed and generally the TB's exhibits provide the essential means for visitors to rethink and reconstruct on an imaginary level the historical moments of this legacy. The reproduction of the Titanic experience is also connected to the real story in contrast to Baudrillard's (1994) viewpoint of simulacra, who stated that they are disengaged from reality. Although the exhibition at TB museum is an imitation of a real tragic accident that had happened in the past, the recreated settings as well as the visual exhibits provoke emotional responses from visitors as posted on TripAdvisor:

Review # 94: "Going through the part that is dedicated to the last messages sent from the Titanic to the ships they called for help was very poignant and brought tears to my eyes."

Review # 117: "The end of the exhibition with the real voices of survivors really touches you."

Consequently the simulacrum of the Titanic experience besides the educational and recreational effects strongly influenced the emotional state of some visitors. However the historical fact of mass death related to the Titanic legacy is not perceived as a fascination with death, which characterizes other cases of dark tourism experiences (Stone and Sharpley, 2008). The study findings indicate that mass death is felt in an emotional state of sorrow, sadness and grief for a very promising journey that ended up in very tragic way. However as noted in the study of Knobloch *et al.*, (2017), sad emotions in some tourist experiences might positively affect visitors' satisfaction and this suggestion is confirmed in the above reviews.

### 5.2.2. *Architecture as a signifier*

The architecture of the building was a topic discussed by 19 out of the 133 reviewers (14.29%). Besides the interior, the exterior of the architectural building comprises a signifier connoting meanings related to the story of the Titanic legend. This is in line with Weidenfeld *et al.*, (2016) who claim that some visitor attractions

are signifiers of symbolic virtues, which are represented by the attraction's physical manifestation as a whole or by some of its elements. It seems that a few visitors realized this fact, something that can be derived from their reviews:

Review # 20: "Everything means something within the museum and shipyard down to the benches outside which represent the Morse code used to spell out Titanic's final S.O.S. message as we learned on our one hour guided Discovery tour."

Review # 34: "...the outside of the building is a replica of the front of the ship (in size as well!)."

Review # 84: "What an incredible place! The symbolism behind the construction is unbelievable and so much thought has gone into building the museum."

Review # 133: "The Discovery Tour is very informative and stresses the incredible symbolism that went into the design of Titanic Belfast."

The fact that the aforementioned reviews mentioned the signifying details of the building does not mean that architecture has no effect on other visitors. As Santos and Marques (2011, p.1103) quote: "the apprehension of signs that composes the experience of being in a destination is made most of all unconsciously by tourists." However, this finding is not only limited to visitors' and tourists' perceptions but extends to consumers in general as their choices are also affected by unconscious inputs (Simonson, 2005). The role of architecture seems to be important in shaping conscious and unconscious perceptions of consumers as for example Crewe (2016, p.525) suggests that store architecture of luxury fashion shops have transformed these spaces into "theatres of signs and symbols." Likewise iconic architectural buildings are signifiers of the place where they are located, such as those representing their cities e.g. Big Ben, London or their entire continent e.g. Sydney Opera House, Australia (Smith and Strand, 2011; Weidenfeld *et al.*, 2016). The TB museum besides signifying the Titanic heritage, also acts as a sign of the city of Belfast, as will be explored in the next section.

### 5.2.3. Iconization: Becoming an Icon of Belfast

The TB museum was designed and planned to function as an urban rejuvenation construction of the Titanic Quarter area and Belfast as a destination (Brown *et al.*, 2013; Coyles, 2013). As a destination icon of Belfast, TB was the most important theme as 27 out of 133 visitors (20.30%) focused on this theme. The following customer reviews are indicative of perceiving the architectural building as iconic of the Titanic as well as a destination icon:

Review # 120: "Arguably the flag ship of Belfast's attractions this is a not to be missed experience."

Review # 123: "...not only does it give lots of information about the shipbuilding industry in Belfast but you see Belfast and what it was like in years gone by. The building of the Titanic was iconic."

Moreover it seems that reviewers are linking the visitor experience of TB to that of visiting the city of Belfast as tourism destination. These findings are in line with the concept of iconicity in the visitor attraction sector (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Weidenfeld, 2010; Weidenfeld *et al.*, 2016). Iconicity indicates the increasing recognition of TB as an icon of Belfast, which also promotes tourism in Belfast.

#### 5.2.4. *Commodification of space and dissatisfaction*

Customer expectations created and influenced by sign promotion are pivotal in visitor satisfaction and visitor management (de Rojas and Camarero, 2008) and eventually determine sign consumption. The evidence on the commodification of space manifests that despite visitors' perceptions of the museum's exhibits as signs, some disappointment emerged in some reviews due to the overcrowded space. Thirteen reviewers commented on this theme (9.77%) and below are some indicative comments:

Review # 89: "An absolute must visit in Belfast. Only small criticism I have is that it was extremely busy when I attended making it difficult to read some of the exhibits - feel that visitor numbers could be limited to a smaller amount per hour."

Review # 104: "Unfortunately it is such a popular attraction that you end up shuffling along and are unable to read certain displays properly as there are so many people obscuring your view."

Review # 107: "We drove one hour and forty minutes out of our way to see this and we were so disappointed. Too many people let in at any one time, we spent our time trying to get through crowds to read things on the walls."

Review # 111: "When we visited it was hard to view the exhibits due to the large volume of people was even difficult to move from room to room."

This evidence supports the fact that sign consumption in TB is strongly related to the commodification of the visitor experience. Even though the sinking of RMS Titanic is a historical fact related to tragic fate and mass death, "contemporary society increasingly consumes, willingly or unwillingly, both real and commodified death and suffering through audio-visual representations, popular culture and the media" (Stone and Sharpley, 2008, p.580). While it is beyond the study's scope to decide whether TB comprises another dark tourism site, the commodification of the visitor experience is a fact, and there are voices that demand a more respectful treatment of the passengers' tragic memory (Holehouse, 2012).

#### 5.2.5. *Souvenirs*

Sign consumption in TB exceeds beyond the awakening memories of the Titanic saga and becomes a subject of commodification. The TB museum follows the logic of the capitalist economy, which dictates the maximization of profits from other sources besides the ticket sales. In fact the business activities of TB range to other



revenue sources as well, like the organizing of weddings, conferences and banquets promoted through the official webpage (Titanic Belfast, 2017). Souvenirs sold at the gift shop of TB comprise an inextricable component of the whole visitor experience as 15 reviewers considered shopping as an important topic to discuss. Paraskevaidis and Andriotis (2015) argue that sign-value is usually attributed to rare, authentic and unique souvenirs. Thus, banal souvenirs, which only function as reminders of the vacation experience, are not able to add prestige to their purchasers' identity, a fact that was confirmed in this study as visitors of TB museum did not relate souvenirs to status attainment:

Review # 23: "The souvenir shop sold that blasted 'Heart of the Ocean' necklace and I was dismayed to see people actually buying it. Probably a best seller too."

Review # 24: "The gift shop has the most amazing collection of books on the subject."

Review # 78: "The souvenir shop is full of great little gifts and ways to remember the day and was fairly priced."

A remarkable fact concerning the gift shop of TB, are the souvenirs with the imprinted image of its architectural building. Besides, such souvenirs are not only sold at TB but can also be purchased on the internet as for example books, t-shirts, mugs, wooden keychain and cufflinks sold on Amazon online store or silver jewelry in the shape of the iconic building (The Belfast Titanic gift store online, 2017). These images comprise simulacra of the original building reprinted on souvenirs that consumers are able to purchase without having ever visited the attraction. It is in question what kind of symbolic meanings are attributed to those souvenirs by their consumers, but this fact is beyond the scope of this study.

Ultimately visitors through their mental and emotional responses posted on TripAdvisor reveal their personal and social identity aspects. Additionally, visitors participate in a social inclusion process by consuming signs of modern culture, as is the TB museum and the Titanic heritage it signifies. That being said, postings and discussions on social networking sites and online communities enhance social connectedness (Sinclair and Grieve, 2017). Thus, visitors and tourists who share their experiences on online social networks maintain social connection with other people and strengthen their social ties.

### 5.3. Sign promotion

#### 5.3.1. Advertising and expectations

The expectations shaped by advertising were present in 11 reviews (8.27%). A major component of sign-value is advertising, which shapes desirable images of the commodities and services as signs to be consumed (Baudrillard, 1981). Baudrillard while analyzing capitalism of the twentieth century placed emphasis on the sphere of consumption (Paraskevaidis and Andriotis, 2015). However, sign-value appears in the earlier stage of promotion. Visitor attractions are promoted on mass and social media based on the logic of differentiation, by promising the candidate visitors a unique

experience (Abrahamson, 2014), but it depends on visitors' opinions whether they perceive the experience as being distinctive or not. The following reviews are indicative:

Review # 55: "And all contained in the most striking building I've seen since the Guggenheim in Bilbao. Brilliant job! The best visitor experience ever!"

Review # 69: "Some visitor attractions don't live up to the hype, this one does and works on all sorts of levels."

In the above review, sign promotion created high expectations which were met, but five other reviewers claimed that their experience exceeded their expectations prior to the trip, something which is considered by de Rojas and Camarero (2008) as positive disconfirmation. Notably, sign promotion can have different impacts on experience expectations of visitors with different character traits (Sheng and Chen, 2012). Besides sign promotion strategy, visitors shape their expectations based on their subjective beliefs and personality traits, as some customers are very receptive to promotion messages while others are skeptic.

### 5.3.2. *The World Travel Awards and TB's marketing policy*

The winning award of TB (World Travel Awards, 2017) was commented by 19 reviewers (14.29%) and can be divided in two sub-themes. The first one includes negative disconfirmation of created expectations regarding the award (only four out of 19 reviews were identified) i.e. when prior expectations were not met. The second concerns confirmed expectations (15 out of 19) i.e. when prior expectations were fulfilled. In the above postings (section 5.3.1.) expectations were met, but a key factor in promoting the distinctiveness of a visitor attraction are the winning awards. TB won the 2016 award (World Travel Awards, 2017) as demonstrated on the front page of its official website followed by the motto: 'World's leading tourist attraction' (Titanic Belfast, 2017). Besides the prestigious award, the TB museum displays several other awards on its webpage trying this way to promote a competitive image. Moreover, advertising the achievement of the winning award is considered to be a basic orientation of the TB's marketing policy as commented by the below visitor:

Review # 132: "The "Disneyesque" ride through the ship's construction phase is interesting, but I don't think that and the other aspects of the museum honestly make this site the "World's Leading Tourist Attraction" as is imprinted over the entry door."

The winning award probably caused curiosity to a wide audience as the good news traveled around the world through mass media (BBC News, 2016). Being used as an efficient marketing tool, the award is based on the logic of differentiation in comparison to other visitor attractions. However, this fact may have created high expectations which in turn lead to negative disconfirmation of expectations as seen in the following indicative visitors' reviews:

Review # 61: "I just don't know how it ranks as the world's number one attraction however. It's good, but not number one good."

Review # 109: "We saw various signs saying this was the worlds best visitor attraction so figured we best have a look. It was really good, but not sure the best I've ever seen."

Nevertheless the disillusioned reviews were fewer in number compared to the visitors who validated the distinction of TB as seen below. Whereas the following reviews are supportive of the TB's award, it is unclear whether the reviewers were informed about this through the attraction's official webpage, the mass or the social media and/or another source of information:

Review # 49: "Now we understand why so many people rave about this amazing place and why it's been voted the number one tourist attraction in the world. What a credit to Belfast, the regeneration of this super city continues relentlessly."

Review # 71: "A must visit in Belfast. Amazing-especially the "ride". So much to see and take in-well presented and well worth its win last year as the World's top tourist attraction."

Review # 87: "Brilliant Museum, no wonder it is voted the number one tourist attraction in the world! Uncover the true legend of Titanic in this interactive Museum."

In conclusion, sign promotion of TB concerns direct advertising methods through their official webpage and their social media pages. Therefore, signs of Belfast's Titanic heritage and their meanings are strongly influenced and reshaped by advertising and fashion trends (i.e. vacation suggestions by lifestyle magazines and newspapers) as promoted through mass and social media.

## INSERT TABLE 1

## 6. Discussion and Conclusions

### 6.1. Conclusions

Given that the sociological approach in the study of consumption patterns in visitor attractions remains rare, this exploratory study adopted a social theory framework based mainly on Baudrillard's (1981) concept of sign-value. TB was selected as a case study because it is a newly constructed visitor attraction destined to regenerate the Titanic Quarter area of Belfast. The city branding of Belfast heavily relies on Titanic heritage in order to increase tourism development (Coyles, 2013). Thus, TB comprises a signifier of the Titanic saga, which continues to attain global media and audience interest. The concept of sign-value is meaningful in revealing

aspects of sign consumption. Most visitors realized the multiple signs of the Titanic history, as reconstructed in TB, and in some cases besides the simulacrum of the Titanic experience, they were emotionally affected by the TB's exhibits.

### 6.2. Theoretical implications

In this study Baudrillard's concept of sign-value was used in an altered state, whereby it was disengaged from prestige items and perceived as the value consumers add to commodities and services attributed with symbolic meanings (e.g. means of social inclusion). Thus the findings of this study contribute to a differentiated version of the concept of sign-value, which can be used in social sciences to explain the meaning-making process in consumer behavior. Furthermore, the 'expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm' was confirmed from the findings of this study as expectations regarding the simulacrum of the Titanic experience were in most cases confirmed or positively disconfirmed. Reviews regarding negative disconfirmation of expectations were primarily related to commodification matters.

### 6.3. Practical implications

In this regard this study opens up the debate on the commodification of the visitor experience and the commercialization of visitor attractions. Commercialization usually depends on the priorities set by management boards. The visitor experience in TB seems to be interpreted by TB's management policy under the strict terms of profit maximization through ticket and souvenir sales. However, the urge for continuous increase of ticket sales leads sometimes to overcrowded spaces and disappointed visitors. In turn, critical reviews on the internet and specifically on online travel and tourism communities might negatively affect travel-buying decisions. If such reviews continue, they might escalate from disappointing online customer reviews to harmful mass media exposure. Therefore, the preservation of a standard quality of consumer experiences in visitor attractions might require controlling or limiting visitor numbers (Tzortzi, 2014).

Another emerging theme, regarding visitor attraction management is that nowadays the visitor experience is co-created and reconsidered by consumers' postings on the internet. As Kim and Fesenmaier (2017, p.28) note: "travelers are not passive information consumers, but rather information creators, editors and distributors." Besides the visitor attraction's marketing policy, consumers' purchasing decisions are strongly influenced by online reviews (Boley *et al.*, 2018; Narangajavana *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, the co-creation and re-evaluation of the visitor experience through consumers' online reviews should be taken into account by both managers and marketers. Furthermore, advertising should avoid creating excessive expectations to visitors in order to decrease the possibility of negative disconfirmation, which can be easily and instantly spread online.

Additional practical implications concern the hospitality industry as restaurants and hotels situated near iconic attractions, might adopt marketing campaigns aligned with symbolic meanings attributed to the attractions. These may include naming businesses after the attractions and/or their offering services and products, such as food menus and decorations that carry some nostalgic and historical flavor.

### 6.4. Limitations and future research

This study identified a knowledge gap regarding the role of awards in sign promotion of visitor attractions. The winning award of TB besides being a very useful marketing tool also enhances the attraction's media image to the public. In light of these tendencies, the role of winning awards in shaping promotion strategies in the tourism and hospitality industry is challenging and should become the subject of future research. Even the famous Michelin-stars, for example, are renowned awards, which are rarely discussed in hospitality marketing studies (Daries *et al.*, 2018). It is also suggested that future studies need to examine how co-branding marketing strategies of award-winning tourism and hospitality businesses might enhance destination brand image. Therefore the link between tourism and hospitality through sign consumption should be further studied.

The limitations of this study derive from the fact that it explored consumer behavior and sign perception of only one visitor attraction. In this regard comparative studies which will examine consumption patterns of different attractions (e.g. paid versus free visitor attractions) at the local (e.g. in the context of a city), regional, national and/or international levels would provide broader and deeper knowledge on the subject. Moreover residents' attitudes on commercialization aspects of visitor attractions would also be of great interest for future studies on how the host community interprets such phenomena (i.e. commodification of local heritage or satisfaction through local tourism development).

The study findings need to be enriched with the use of other qualitative methods as for example in-depth interviews, which might provide further detailed analysis of unidentified aspects in this paper. Likewise, the use of quantitative methods in testing other sociological concepts and theories of consumption based on larger samples might extend or modify the current findings. Additionally, socio-demographic variables were not used in this study because the primary data from TripAdvisor was primarily based on anonymous and pseudonymous online reviews. Therefore, future studies need to examine whether socio-demographic data of visitors influence their consumption behavior and their related online reviews. This article provides a theoretical and empirical contribution for future studies in other tourism sub sectors as well as other service sectors (e.g. hospitality, leisure, recreation, retail, catering) where sign-value is pivotal in both consumption and promotion.

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Table 1: Sign-value, sign consumption and sign promotion in Titanic Belfast

	TripAdvisor reviews	
	Reviews	%
<i>Sign-value</i>		
Sign-value	10	7.52
<i>Sign consumption</i>		
Simulacrum of the Titanic experience	19	14.29
Architecture as a signifier	19	14.29
Iconization: Becoming an Icon of Belfast	27	20.30
Commodification of space and dissatisfaction	13	9.77
Souvenirs	15	11.27
<i>Sign promotion</i>		
Advertising and expectations	11	8.27
The World Travel Awards and TB's marketing policy	19	14.29
<i>Total</i>	133	100